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Objective Life Events, Perceptions, and Health

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Abstract

Research on the pathological effects of stressful life events and the many controversial issues confronting life stress researchers have been reviewed recently in a number of volumes (Appl & Trumbull, 1967; Dodge & Martin, 1970, Dohrenwend & Dohrenwend, 1974; Gunderson & Rahe, 1974; Levi, 1971, Levine & Scotch, 1970; McGrath, 1970). Long-term studies of stressful or disruptive life events and health changes are needed in order to identify particular life stressors that have importance for disease etiology and, further, to understand the complex interactions between stressful events and adaptive processes, leading in some cases to the onset of illness and in some cases not. This area of research is critical for the development of effective preventive efforts.

One important issue is the role of individual perception or cognition in intensifying or reducing the pathological effects of stressful events. That is, in addition to simply recording an event objectively, is it important to assess the subjective meaning of the event to the individual? Many investigators (e.g., Hudgens, 1974) have taken the position that assessing individual perceptions is essential while others contend that this procedure

merely introduces a great deal of measurement error. Brown (1974) has made a number of suggestions for controlling error introduced by self-reports of life events and their meanings. In particular, he emphasized the usefulness of what he called contextual measures--the investigator's descriptions of biographical circumstances surrounding events which exclude accounts of personal reactions to the events. The author takes the approach that this question of the importance of perceptions is an empirical one, requiring an analysis of the sources of variance in perceptions of life stresses and the correlations of underlying components of these perceptions with behavior criteria such as illness. Such a procedure, utilizing an analysis of variance and regression analysis framework, has been applied to the analysis of various environmental stressors aboard Navy ships (Pugh, 1975). This procedure should be carried out after it has been established by means of objective data that certain life events affect illness rate.

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